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# Moderation as courage: the legacy of Stanley Hoffmann as a Scholar and Public Intellectual

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Stanley Hoffmann's biography and scholarship transcend multiple divides and defy easy classification. His theoretical approach to international relations was eclectic in that it could not easily be described as either realist or liberal, as noted by Joseph Nye and others (Lambert 2007; see also Hall 2017). His teaching ranged across international relations, political history, French politics, and social and political thought. A central aspect of his work was a constant dialogue between domestic and international politics, empirical political science and political theory, and between France and the United States, where one country often served as a reference point for observations about the other, as in Hoffmann's essays about nationalism (Hoffmann 1993 and 1998). This sense of transcending divides could also be said to characterize Hoffmann's position in relation to the role of being an academic and a public intellectual. Being able to examine issues from multiple perspectives, effectively both as an insider and as a semi-outsider of sorts, rooted both in France and the United States, enabled Hoffmann to develop a distinctive approach to the study of politics and society that combined familiarity, empathy, and detachment (Hoffmann 1974: xi). In the preface to his collaborative book on the Iraq war, Hoffmann says: 'Nevertheless, I have resigned myself to an ambiguous condition: someone whom his nature, his choices, and his fate have made marginal in almost all possible ways, neither fully integrated in an America which, except for New England, remains largely unknown to me but not belonging either really to France whose daily life I have not shared for many years' (Hoffmann 2004: vii). Many observers have noted how intimately Hoffmann's scholarship was bound up with his own biography – or as Hoffmann himself remarked in a memoir of his childhood, 'It wasn't I who chose to study world politics. World politics forced themselves on me at a very early age.'

Unlike many other commemorations of Stanley Hoffmann that have primarily focused on his significant contributions as a teacher, institution builder and mentor (see e.g. Hall 2017), this article gives pride of place to Hoffmann's scholarly, intellectual and ethical contributions. Given the prominence of the liberal tradition in US political science at least through the 1980s, when a synthesis of neo-realism and neoliberalism led to an acceptance of most structural-realist assumptions within international relations, one could even say that he started within the mainstream. He was a man of his time, attentive to the early manifestations of the process of European integration while rejecting world government and other alternatives to the nation-state form as mere successors to external domination, at a time when decolonization in the name of sovereignty had so recently paved the way to freedom across much of the globe (Hoffmann 1986: 7). Indeed, he would later describe his PhD dissertation, *Organisations internationales et pouvoirs politiques des Etats*, as "a wild call for overcoming sovereignty" (Hoffmann in Miller and Smith 1993: 9). As a consequence, when structural realists became hegemonic in the field in the 1980s,

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they would tax Hoffmann with a typically liberal, contradictory struggle for cooperation between nations beyond power politics, dismissing his efforts to overcome the state as a political organization and his praise for interdependence and influence beyond force (See for instance Jonathan Haslam's harsh criticism along these lines. Haslam 2002: 220-221, 226-227). In the last decades of his career, Hoffmann also exhibited decidedly Kantian inclinations, emphasizing ethical imperatives, not least in relation to human rights (Keohane 2009). This ethical turn was consistent with his broader discomfort with realist thinking.

If Hoffmann was never strictly a "realist," nor was he in the camp of radical critics like Noam Chomsky or leftwing critics of American foreign policy in France. (See Chomsky 1969a, 1969b; and Hoffmann 1969, for a sense of their disagreements). Revisiting the debate between proponents of nuclear deterrence and abolitionists in 1985, envisioned in terms of a struggle between 'traditionalists' and 'radicals', Hoffmann would acknowledge that "I am a traditionalist in case you didn't know it" (Hoffmann 1986: 5). Indeed, as his student, friend, and collaborator Robert Keohane has pointed out, there is something rather modest or conservative about the kind of analysis and critique that Hoffmann provides (Keohane 2009: 370). He had only limited sympathy with Marxian critical theory and dependency approaches (see Hoffmann 1977). Marxists and critical theorists would probably trace this "conservatism" to Hoffmann's belief in the power of ideas and accommodation with existing power structures in world politics and academia. Post-structuralists, feminists, and post-colonial scholars might well regard him as a rationalist who ended up entrenching the politics of knowledge of hegemonic, white, Ivy-League America. Hoffmann was certainly not a revolutionary.

In this essay, we argue that as a scholar, a teacher, and a public intellectual Stanley Hoffmann was consistent in staking out a territory of thoughtful liberal critique. The strengths and limitations of his outlook are those of the liberal tradition itself. His distance from realism and the temptations of power saved him from being absorbed by the National Security State, while his skepticism towards narrow and rigid leftist pieties drove him to reach out to broader audiences (from Vietnam to the Iraq War) in his advocacy of a moderate and sane foreign policy. In so doing, he also defended the contribution of the humanities to the study of international relations in a way that is perhaps even more urgent today. This includes a strong case against monolingualism and monocausal grand explanations, which can be seen as important limitations of contemporary social science and international-relations scholarship, especially in the United States.

## Policy relevance beyond US policymaking elites

Unlike a number of other European émigrés to the US of his generation who at various times figured amongst his colleagues at Harvard, Stanley Hoffmann seems never to have entertained the possibility of becoming directly involved in policy-making in Washington, DC. While Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Francis Bator, and even the historian Richard Pipes served either for longer or shorter periods (as did US-born colleagues, like Samuel Huntington and Joseph Nye), Hoffmann does not appear to have felt this temptation. Nor did he get involved in militarized Cold War social science research. This is quite exceptional in the context of Cold War social science, perhaps

especially at Harvard (Solovey and Cravens 2012; Rhode 2013). While Hoffmann wrote approvingly of some of Kissinger's historical writings, he was critical in many respects of Kissinger's record as a policy-maker. In a discussion of Kissinger's attempts to shape world order, Hoffmann argues that 'the lesson from Kissinger's attempt should be, not that world order policy is wrong, but that that particular one was both too arrogant and too tight, too much made-in-Washington and too obsessed by stability to succeed' (Hoffmann 1976-77: 107). In a comparative discussion of Kissinger and Metternich, Hoffmann highlights the pitfalls of overestimating the power of charismatic individuals to shape policy and the many challenges confronting US leaders that stemmed both from bureaucratic capacity and from domestic constraints on foreign policy-making (Hoffmann 1972). The proximity of international-relations scholarship to the corridors of power – indeed even the 'kitchens of power' (Hoffmann 1977: 49), as academics-turned-policy-makers participate in the exercise of power and formulation of policy – too often meant that the ideal of dispassionate and objective analysis was undermined in the process. In other words, 'the closer the Washingtonian connection, the greater the temptation of letting oneself be absorbed' (Hoffmann 1977: 56; see also Hoffmann 1986: 2). In an early article discussing the scholar's vocation, Hoffmann affirms that 'his duty is to seek knowledge and understanding for their own sake; and this implies that the main purpose of research should not be "policy scientism"' (Hoffmann 1959: 349; Hoffmann 1957). There is a risk that academic analyses are shaped by the scholars' desire to be relevant to policy concerns and even to earn the right to participate themselves, if not directly in government, then in the para-governmental foundations responsible for funding their research (Hoffmann 1977: 50; for a focused analysis of this problem, see Solovey 2013).

The question of policy relevance and the relationship of scholarship to policy-making remains controversial, especially in the subfield of international relations. Hoffmann has argued that the proximity of American academia to the corridors of power in Washington, DC has often compromised international relations as a field (for a focus on security studies and self-censorship, see Pelopidas 2016). However, despite his misgivings about direct involvement with the world of policy-making, Hoffmann's work spoke to policy in at least two ways.

First, many of Hoffmann's writings straddled the divide between scholarship and public commentary. His numerous publications in journals like the *New York Review of Books*, *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs* and *Daedalus* testify to his ambition to reach a wider audience and contribute to popular debate, notably by elevating it and offering nuanced and dispassionate analysis of key issues. These articles often addressed current affairs, such as the foreign policy of the Carter administration, or offered interpretations of topical issues, like globalization (Hoffmann 2002). Hoffmann's ideal reader was the public intellectual, which included two political communities: France and the US, as well as citizens, some of whom had the privilege of being his students (Hoffmann 1986: 17). For him, teaching, scholarship and political commentary were necessarily complementary aspects of his activity as a public intellectual. Peter Hall cites him as giving the following advice to students: "as scholars and as citizens working in a field in which violence, deceit, injustice and oppression are in full display, beware of illusions, but never give up hope – by which I didn't mean a faith in progress, only the modest belief that it is not impossible." (Cited in Hall 2017) This piece of advice illustrates Hoffmann's belief in the individual as an agent of progressive change, but change of a limited kind; his fear of political voluntarism led him to advocate moderation as a response to the two great ideological projects of the twentieth century, fascism and communism. It also shows that his audience is both composed of his students and of

citizens of a political community, past, present and in the making.

Second, true to important strands in the French political tradition, he also perceived the intellectual's responsibility to speak out when fundamental issues were at stake (Hazareesingh 1994, chapter 2). This moderate stance took a lot of personal and professional courage at critical times. His early critique of the US involvement in Vietnam on realist rather than moral grounds, in a Spring 1965 debate with then US Defense Department official Daniel Ellsberg, is too famous to be recounted again (Paisner 1965). We will focus on three instances: his admiration for Raymond Aron over time, the intellectual turn towards nuclear weapons in France in the early 1980s, and the 2003 controversy about the Iraq war and the French veto at the UN Security Council, perhaps best encapsulated by the book of interviews with French historian Frédéric Bozo (Hoffmann 2003).

Hoffmann's admiration for Raymond Aron is well established (inter alia, Hoffmann 1983a, 1983b, 1985).<sup>2</sup> He wrote a long and warm obituary for the *New York Review of Books* when his mentor passed, but he never was a blind follower. In the 1970s, when Aron turned to the neo-conservative right,<sup>3</sup> Hoffmann distanced himself. Even in the obituary, he writes of Aron: "[I] have reached, on many occasions, conclusions different from his own (I was a *Mendèsiste*, later a Gaullist, and my views of nuclear strategy and of American diplomacy are not at all those Aron held in his last years.)" (Hoffmann 1983b). The Aron he praised the most is the earlier one, the Renaissance man for whom the sense of the tragic in history does not yet fully mean embracing conservative politics. In an assessment of Aron's contributions to international relations, Hoffmann largely sidesteps this conservatism, though he hints at it by acknowledging some differences of opinion, most notably, by criticizing Aron for having 'curbed his Kantian inclinations – too much for my own taste' (Hoffmann 1985:

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<sup>2</sup> Strategist Bernard Brodie also labels Hoffmann's review of *Paix et guerre entre les nations* in the February 1963 issue of *Critique* as « marvelous » in his letter to Aron from 28 August 1963. Fonds Raymond Aron (NAF28060) Aron (NAF28060), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, box 88, folder « Santa Monica (California IV) ».

<sup>3</sup> Justin Vaïsse's attempt at minimizing Aron's proximity with the neoconservatives is interesting in that it focuses on the 1980s, not the 1970s and still acknowledges Aron as the most important *compagnon de route français* alongside Jean-François Revel (Vaïsse 2005). In any case, Aron's conservative turn in the 1970s is visible in the growing influence of Carl Schmitt on this thinking and by his growing concern about a communist takeover of Europe in the context of economic and military decline of the US with Watergate and Vietnam and the union of left wing political forces in France (Steinmetz-Jenkins 2014 and 2016: chap. 4).

21; see also Hoffmann 1957: 921-923 for an early critique of the conservative effects of the claim of value-neutral objectivity in the social sciences).

The “new philosopher” and intellectual gadfly André Glucksmann’s 1983 book on nuclear deterrence, *La force du vertige*, enjoyed night-unanimous praise in the French media, with the exception of the communist press and the *Canard enchaîné*. This publicity coup followed a trend of accommodation with militarization and nuclear weapons among the French intelligentsia (Hoffmann 1984: 386; Gorand 1984: 389). Amidst an overwhelmingly favorable reception of the book, Stanley Hoffmann ridiculed its melange of literary pretension and techno-fetishist enthusiasm for the Bomb, which resulted in turning the warhead into the main subject of History. The title of Hoffmann’s review, “le presque rien et le n’importe quoi,” exceeded his usual moderate touch and treated that as a French ideology (Heuser 1998 chap. 5; Pelopidas 2012). Of course, one could claim that here Hoffmann is simply being a good member of the American “strategic community,” which believes in empirical quantification of damage rather than lyrical speculations. He himself admits to this to a degree (387). But at a time when French intellectuals had largely abandoned the field of nuclear critique, embraced nuclear deterrence as the insurmountable horizon of our times, and focused on “pacifism” as the new enemy (Anderson 2017), it is worth remembering Hoffmann’s warning:

Européen moi-même, je partage la révoluscion pour la guerre conventionnelle exprimée par André Glucksmann. Si la dissuasion nucléaire était une panacée, une garantie parfaite contre une telle guerre en Europe, je serais d’accord avec lui. Mais la foi dans cette dissuasion-là est devenue en France l’équivalent de la foi dans la ligne Maginot. Et c’est cela qui est inquiétant. (Hoffmann 1984: 387; see also Hoffmann 1985: 18-20; 1986: 13)

He offered a very lucid assessment of the militarization of French intelligentsia at the time (Anderson, 2017):

Il raisonne comme si la seule force capable d’ébranler la dissuasion était le pacifisme, sans comprendre que celui-ci, en Allemagne comme aux Etats-Unis, est dans une très large mesure non une capitulation devant la menace soviétique, mais une réaction fort sensée de gens horrifiés par l’escalade des moyens, par les propos officiels sur la possibilité de mener et de gagner des guerres nucléaires. (Hoffmann 1984: 387)

Finally, we should note Hoffmann’s early and steadfast opposition to the Iraq War. Jacques Chirac and Dominique de Villepin’s opposition to the 2003 Iraq War has been praised in retrospect as a sign of wisdom and moderation; however, most French strategists at the time were agnostic or skeptical of that attitude (See Bozo, 2017). Instead, Stanley Hoffmann was opposed to the war early on and expressed it in writing, in French first, in *L’Amérique vraiment impériale* (2003). The long interview that became the book took place as early as June 2003 (Hoffmann 2003:8) and was published in October, a year before the English version. In it, Hoffmann is also critical of the French officials for being too ambiguous about their opposition to this war.

J’ai été également surpris par le manque de réaction du côté français. [...] En réalité, l’attitude du gouvernement français a simplement consisté à [...] s’en tenir à la diplomatie secrète. [...] L’Ambassadeur de France, Jean-David Levitte, [...] n’a commencé sa tournée d’explication qu’après la fin de la guerre elle-même. (2003:13).

Hoffmann’s choice to write his review of Glucksmann’s book in French for *Commentaire* and to signal his opposition to the Iraq war in both French and English discussions of “imperial America” speaks to the second dimension we would like to

highlight: his defense of a modality of research and teaching opposed to monolingualism and grand generalizations.

## A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The other contribution we wish to highlight here is Stanley Hoffmann's commitment to the enduring value of the humanities. It seems clear that he observed the development of the modern social sciences in the United States with a certain sense of bemused detachment. His famous characterization of international relations as an 'American social science' (1977) is still widely cited forty years after publication. (In an ironic gesture, given its critique of mainstream international relations, one could note that it has been cited more than 100 times since 2017 alone, and that its core insights are widely confirmed by leading international relations scholars, e.g., Waever 1998; Walt 2011). Hoffmann's article embodies a critique of two aspects of the discipline. The first aspect relates to its Americanness and hence the proximity to power.<sup>4</sup> The second problem with international relations is associated with what Hoffmann perceived as its rather hubristic scientific ambitions, not least encapsulated in quantification and formalization (Hoffmann 1985: 14).

As famously argued by Martin Hollis and Steve Smith (1990), the social sciences can be divided into two broad traditions. One of them is related to the rise of the natural sciences, or what they describe as the outsider's view, akin to 'a natural scientist seeking to explain the workings of nature' (Hollis and Smith 1990: 1). This has been the dominant tradition in much US political science at least since the behavioral revolution in the middle of the twentieth century. The other tradition claims a nineteenth-century historicist lineage, or the attempt to write history from the inside by uncovering the meanings attributed to events by historical actors themselves, as well as the notion of understanding (*Verstehen*) as first formulated by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. Keohane (2009) is right to highlight that Hoffmann's work reflects elements of both approaches, including an awareness of many fundamental continuities of international relations (Keohane 2009: 370), but given the emphasis Hoffmann places on history and human agency, his empirical approach comes much closer to the second tradition. In his article about Raymond Aron's contributions to international relations, Hoffmann approvingly discusses Aron's assessment that 'it is much more difficult than in the case of economic theory to separate such abstract theory or conceptualization from the concrete sociological and historical study, the logic of behavior from the specific characteristics of the actors. Only the concrete study can help make the behavior of the actors, their calculations of forces, and the stakes they give to their conflicts intelligible' (Hoffmann 1985: 15). This calls for an approach privileging understanding, with great emphasis on analyzing particular actors, situations, goals, and constraints. It also accepts reasons as the main causes of action and is suspicious of unconscious causal forces that would reduce reasons to insignificant rationalizations (Hoffmann 1986: 8-9). Such choices explain Keohane's assessment of Hoffmann's critique as "modest" since it leaves existing power structures intact.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Hoffmann was entirely hostile to generalization, but the generalizations he favored were of a bounded kind. Such generalizations relate to trends at a certain time or in a well-defined set of cases. This included generalizations about post-war France (Hoffmann 1963 and 1973) or the 'post-Cold-War world', as in his influential 'Clash of Globalizations' (Hoffmann 2002), which was

a response to Fukuyama (1989, 1992) and Huntington (1993, 1996), or his writings about the principal features of the global system or European integration in this period.

While general theories can help clarify concepts, establish categories and raise important questions, Hoffmann suggests that most grand generalizations formulated by international-relations scholars are of limited value and need to be complemented with the analysis of specific countries and cases, which is essential to a proper understanding of international relations.

In his classic article on International relations as an “American social science,” Hoffmann notes that the three international-relations books he would take to a desert island are – Thucydides (*Peloponnesian War*), Waltz (*Man, the State and War*) and Aron (*Peace and War*) (Hoffmann 1977: 51). It should be noted that the Waltz book mentioned here is not his later work, notably the *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz 1979), which probably would have gone too far in the direction of deductive grand theory for Hoffmann’s taste (see the discussion in Hoffmann 1977: 52 on what would later be published as *The Theory of International Politics*).

One of the problems of such generalizations is that they are too strongly determined by the particular position of the scholar who proposes them: determinations of historical conjuncture, geographical location, ideology, training, and language. This is where Stanley Hoffmann truly appears in his guise of the renaissance man: he would encourage learning foreign languages as a way of distancing oneself from one’s native cultural universe and as a step towards a more fruitful understanding of the other. The importance of distancing oneself is also visible in Hoffmann’s call for deep historical investigation (i.e. a distancing from one’s present conditions) as opposed to the instrumental use of the past as a large dataset which only has an illustrative value. His words should still resonate today: “American political scientists do not receive enough training either in history or in foreign languages, indispensable for work on past relations among states (Hoffmann 1977:57). This is consistent with what he admired in Aron and Thucydides: their historical and sociological sensitivities and their attention to the self-understanding of historical contemporaries in their own terms. This approach meant that Hoffmann distanced himself to some degree from some of his American colleagues, many of whom favored a more deductive approach to theorizing. Indeed, as he wrote about Aron in 1985, ‘even if one compares him with American specialists of international relations, Aron seems strikingly original’ (Hoffmann 1985: 13).

Hoffmann’s approach is reflected in his studies of foreign policy. For example, his writings on French foreign policy under de Gaulle combine an awareness of various structural constraints, of the role of history and of the traumas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but

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<sup>4</sup> Hoffmann had also identified the problematic US-centrism of political science naturalized as objectivity as early as 1957 (Hoffmann 1957: 920-921).



also emphasize statesmanship and the creative strategies adopted to modify the international milieu and maximize France's influence in the world (Hoffmann 1974: 290). In later years Hoffmann deplored the limited attention his Harvard colleagues paid to the teaching of foreign policy: 'Jargon has invaded everything and the relationship of theories to reality has faded. There are all these wonderful equations, but how are they affected by a real-world phenomenon like death? When I came to Harvard, American foreign policy was near the top of the hierarchy of subjects taught here. Today, there is no tenured government professor teaching American foreign policy. At present, the hierarchy of prestige values everything that is abstract and theoretical, and you cannot do that with foreign-policy studies. They have to be concrete and deal with concrete issues.' (Lambert 2007)

## Conclusion

Our article has highlighted how Stanley Hoffmann's French-American biography and interest in both countries can be seen as reflected in his general approach to scholarship and public life. While he was a successful and influential American academic, he was in many ways closer to the traditional French ideal of scholarship and to liberal ideals of an intellectual. In his book on *Duties Beyond Borders*, Hoffmann addresses the role of the intellectual and states that 'quite simply his duty is to dismantle prejudices, national self-righteousness, and parochial views, patiently and painstakingly, to protest constantly against inequity and violence, which is not very easy; it is to be the conscience of national society' (Hoffmann 1981: 226). In his scholarship and public writings Hoffmann promoted such a nuanced understanding of countries, cultures and foreign policy-making, without calling for radical change in the power structures.

In the current times, when the humanities are under threat in many countries, and policy-relevant research is either contemptuously disregarded or exclusively directed to policy elites, Hoffmann's legacy of scholarship and public engagement is a powerful example. It manifests the strengths of a nuanced and humanistic approach to the study of society and global politics, beyond the demands of the policymaking elites of the day and bridges the roles of the scholar and public intellectual. This entails engaging with a wider audience and maintaining a necessary critical detachment from the corridors of power. Hoffmann's scholarship also demonstrates how a humanistic approach that values the study of languages and history in an era of heightened scientific ambitions can provide a rich and nuanced understanding of politics and international relations that is a necessary prerequisite for such policy analysis. Even those who feel that courage today requires more than moderation and that existing power structures need to be challenged would be well advised not to give up on the two struggles of Stanley Hoffmann.

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